

POLITICS IN ARGENTINA

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The present military government came to power in March of 1976 to the relief of a large majority of the Argentines, who were sick of terrorism and the socio-economic dissolution that characterized Isabel Peron's regime. The ruling Junta set for itself three priorities: to eradicate terrorism, restore a devastated economy, and reorganize national institutions to avoid the political mistakes of the past.

The regime still is accepted as a necessary and stabilizing force by almost all Argentines, whose history of military interventions and frequent crises have led them to expect and to accept paternalistic -- even authoritarian regimes -- to deliver them from chaos.

Even without terrorism -- by now almost thoroughly controlled -- and its attendant problems of human rights violations this government would have hard work: It has worked more than two years to develop a scheme of power which will establish the authorities and duties for the three-member ruling Junta and for a "president" whose powers may be circumscribed to resemble those of a nation's prime minister. Even after the recent renewal of President Videla's mandate for a three year period (at the end of April), the "structure of power" remains largely to be worked out and ratified.

ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)

U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS

Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

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The question of basic political reform that will in the future preclude the radical shifts from military to civilian government -- frequently with intervening periods of chaos -- still has to be tackled. Everyone concedes that a civilian democratic regime must be re-created, but this time with an institutionalized role for the military forces to play. But how? Civilian politicians are largely discredited; the military is itself divided, but basically lukewarm to a return to a "democratic government" of the kinds which have failed in the past; political institutions have been eroded or destroyed. The makings of a new, stable political situation are not present.

A person knowing Argentina might ask so why a new "caudillo"? A strongman has "saved" the country several times, why not again? There is a candidate: Junta member Admiral Emilio Massera is a potent politician -- charismatic, pragmatic (some would call him unscrupulous), dynamic. He is willing to make alliances with the Peronists and attack the government's unpopular economic stabilization program. His "candidacy" however causes heartburn to the Army, and institutional forces are arrayed against him. Still, he is a contender. Massera retires from the Navy in September, but not, we think, from politics.

The hardest fought politics in the short run will likely derive from Argentina's economy: The government will continue

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its tough stabilization policies, unpopular however necessary, creating a wide opening for criticism by Massera and by civilian politicians.

"Human rights" may grow as a domestic political issue as terrorism wanes, and the issues of those disappeared and unaccounted for becomes exploitable by domestic groups.

Foreign affairs do not present significant problems at this time, although Argentina's troubles with Chile over the Beagle Channel are a serious potential irritant. Other problems in the region can be surmounted, put off, or managed. Problems with the United States over human rights are troublesome but not compelling so. Argentina can -- with some difficulty -- do without US military merchandise and credits. EXIM and IFI sanctions will hurt more. But the Argentine government is satisfied that what it perceives as a far greater threat -- Marxist-inspired terrorism to destroy Argentine society -- make it worth the risk of offending the U.S.

Amembassy Buenos Aires  
POL:WHHallman  
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